

Fourth grader Soraya misses her only friend. It's been months since she met a mermaid named Estelle and rescued her from Bayside Aquarium. Soraya is sure no one else will ever like her because she's too weird. When her class goes on a field trip to Balabrook Caverns, Soraya sneaks away down a secret tunnel. Soon she is pulled in to a new adventure filled with magic, danger . . . and friendship where she least expected to find it.

Soraya & the Dragon

by Salima Alikhan

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REYCRAFT BOOKS

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illustrated by Atieh Sohrabi

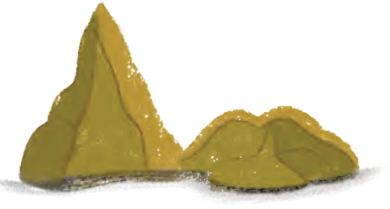
"Humphrey Hatches His Eggs"
illustrated by Jennifer Naalchigar

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To Mindy, for befriending dragons with me. – S.A.

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1

Into the Mouth of the Beast

Nimbla Moony switched on her Blaster Belt and zoomed through space. She was on a mission to rescue a poor stray Obblegookian, who had accidentally drifted inside the enormous, yawning mouth of the fearsome Cragulon Beast.

Soraya gaped up at the entrance of Balabrook Caverns. Out of the corner of her eye, she could have sworn she glimpsed stardust and space debris floating, and maybe the corner of a certain magic bubble cape.

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Soraya held up her copy of *Nimbla Moony and the Cragulon Beast*. The cavern in front of her looked exactly like the Cragulon's huge, open mouth in the comic. Rock formations jutted up from the ground, like crooked and crowded teeth. Other formations hung from the ceiling, like fangs.

The rest of her fourth-grade class, though, didn't seem to mind that they were about to enter the mouth of a space monster.

"This is going to be the best field trip ever!" said Christoff, as the whole class crammed through the entrance.

"Are you coming, Soraya?" Ms. Staples called. "Also, what have I told you about reading and walking?"

Soraya sighed and stuffed the comic into her pocket. Too bad no one else was interested in learning about super dangerous space beasts. If they would only listen to her, she could warn them all. But *no*.

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She followed her classmates inside, and immediately tripped on the uneven floor.

"Soraya, please watch where you're going."

Soraya gazed around, her jaw hanging open. The air was cool and moist, and smelled earthy. It turned out that stepping into the caverns *was* like stepping into a mouth—a mouth with huge teeth that really needed braces. But the rock formations looked like a bunch of other things, too: icicles, long strands of hair, curtains, and huge stone jellyfish. The ones poking up from the ground looked like mountains, or castle towers. A small brook gurgled through the cavern. Hidden lights shone, making the rocks seem to glow magically.

Soraya wondered if this cavern burped poisonous gas, the way the Cragulon Beast did.

"I thought this place would be boring," said Chesney, as the class gathered in the main cavern. "But it's even better than the aquarium!"

Soraya felt her awe vanish. Sadness twinged in her gut. *Nothing* could be better than the aquarium. On the class field trip there, she had met her best and only friend, a mermaid named Estelle. Estelle had been trapped in one of the aquarium tanks, and Soraya helped rescue her and return her to the sea.

Whenever Soraya thought about Estelle, she felt extra lonely. Did her only friend ever think about her, thousands of miles away, back in her home under the ocean?

"Welcome to Balabrook Caverns!" called a cavern guide. "Let's start our tour."

Soraya's class followed the guide a little farther into the mouth of the Cragulon—or, into the cavern, Soraya kept reminding herself. She stood as far away from her class as she could. Thinking about Estelle just reminded her that she had nothing in common with her classmates.

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They might be excited, but none of them understood the important things—like the fact that the cavern resembled a Cragulon's mouth.

Soraya frowned as she looked around at the other kids. She knew her mom wouldn't be happy about her avoiding them. Her mom's entire mission in life seemed to be to get her to make friends. This also meant that Soraya was a constant disappointment.

Just a few months ago, right after she had come home from the aquarium trip where she'd met Estelle, her mom had said: "Did you make any friends today?"

And for the first time ever, Soraya had answered, "Yup!"

Her mom dropped the apple she'd been eating. "You did? Well, we should have them over for dinner! I can call their parents to arrange it."

"You can't call her parents, Mom. She's a mermaid and she lives thousands of miles away at the bottom of the ocean, in the Mariana Trench."

Her mom's face fell. "That's not funny, Soraya."

"I know. I'm not laughing, Mom."

Her mom had pursed her lips. "You can't just hide in your comic books. You have to face real life and make real friends."

"Estelle *is* my real friend," Soraya had said. "But I can't hang out with her, because she went back to the ocean. Besides, real life is overrated. Comics have heroes, magic, and adventure."

Her mom had given her a Look. "We can't always just spend our time the way we *want* to, honey."

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